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AUTHOR Beaman, Ronda; Stoltz, Paul G.
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ABSTRACT

At one time or another virtually all public relations courses use the group project to facilitate "real world" learning for students. Public relations faculty report forming the groups themselves in one (or a combination) of three ways: basing the choice on class assignments and prior knowledge of the students; leaving the decision up to the students; or leaving it up to the luck of the draw. This paper describes an alternative method for forming students into groups that provides optimum performance potential, alleviates the stress on the professor, and allows students some creative input. It is also far more professional. This method begins early in the semester. Students submit an anonymous resume labeled only with an identification number. The instructor chooses group leaders from the resumes and then the leaders choose their group members from the remaining anonymous resumes. Two years of experience in using this methods has demonstrated that this approach yields more equitable groups and a superior end result. (RS)

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# A METHOD TO THE MADNESS: THE SELECTION OF STUDENT PUBLIC RELATIONS GROUPS

written and submitted by

Professor Ronda Beaman
and
Dr. Paul G. Stoltz

Northern Arizona University

Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication

Public Relations Division

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**ABSTRACT**

At one time or another virtually all public relations courses utilize the group project to facilitate "real world" learning for students. With such prominence in course work, it is necessary to, 1) examine how groups are designed and 2) to provide alternative and creative methods for this vital function. This paper provides such an alternative and points the way to increased awareness of the methods used to produce student groups for work in public relations.

"Eenie, Meenie, Miny, Mo ... or do I pick the ones I know?" However we make our choices, putting together student groups or agencies has a direct effect on the final outcome of the class project. So many public relations classes are centered on the student group, and yet so little has been said about how they are constructed[1]. In a recent telephone survey of 25 public relations professors, we found; 17 put the groups together themselves based on class assignments and prior knowledge of the students, four left the decision to the students to form groups, and the remaining four did something similar to a lottery - - leaving it to the luck of the draw to determine which students were assigned to which groups[2].

The results of this survey were substantiated by a second survey of 25 full and part-time communication faculty at a mid-sized southwestern university eighty-eight percent of whom reported using groups for in-class assignments[3]. Forty percent of the faculty who used groups chose groups by leaving the decision to the

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[1] A review of the literature revealed substantial research on group processes and group dynamics, yet no sources regarding the selection of groups in a classroom setting were found.

[2] The individuals surveyed were chosen based upon a published directory of public relations professors. This was considered an exploratory, informational survey. A more rigorous, comprehensive study is required to draw more generalizable conclusions regarding the practices of public relations educators.

[3] This survey included 25 part and full time tenure-track and non-tenure track faculty. When asked why they used these particular methods of group selection, 35% reported convenience to be the deciding factor while 56% expressed a need to mix up the students. The remaining 9% were concerned with the perceived fairness of the selection. Overall, 40% felt that these methods of selection had no adverse effect on the overall process and results of the groups.

students, thirty-six percent used some random selection method such as counting off by fours and twenty-eight percent grouped by proximity in the classroom. Some faculty reported using more than one of these methods.

All of these methods have severe deficiencies. In the groups determined solely by professor discretion, the professor is likely to be blamed by the students for both any personality conflicts that may arise as well as anything less than outstanding results. This projection of the students' own shortfalls onto the professor does little to enhance the students' learning. Several professors surveyed in the second study cited this disadvantage when discussing this method.

Allowing students to form groups with friends or acquaintances is asking for leadership problems. Who takes charge of the work at hand when the group is formed around relationships? Blake, Mouton and Allen are quick to point out the downfalls of a relationship-focussed group that is trying to accomplish a specific task (1987). Less outgoing students may feel tremendous resentment at being left out of the early "draft picks", having to awkwardly join a group that did not request their presence. This selection method also frequently results in one weak group of students who no one else wanted. Forty percent of those faculty surveyed reported unequal distribution of talent to be a problem with this method.

The problems with the "luck of the draw" technique need hardly be enumerated. The idea of one group with all the skilled writers and another filled with people who hate each other could lead to

"the class from hell" for both professor and students alike. How often does one ever win at a lottery?

Given the obvious drawbacks of these group selection methods, students appear fairly split in their opinions of group experiences. A recent survey of 1,222 students in communication classes at a mid-sized southwestern university revealed nearly three quarters (72%) of communication classes assigned group projects[4]. Out of 807 students who described how groups were selected in their classes, 762 or ninety-four percent had been in groups selected by at least one of the methods described above. Of those, 163 or twenty-one percent felt that these selection methods resulted in a bad group experience, while 208 or twenty-seven percent expressed positive experiences. The remaining 52% remained uncommitted, reporting some positives and some negatives.

Despite students' often lukewarm response to group assignments, workteam experience is becoming increasingly important (Kotter, 1988; Blake, Mouton and Allen, 1987; Peters and Waterman, 1984; Long, 1987). As our world has become increasingly complex, the organizations that form our society have mirrored that complexity (Block, 1987). As a response to that complexity and increased global competition, organizations have resorted to more and more work being done and decisions being made in teams (Kotter,

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[4] The survey was distributed to all students enrolled in communication classes during a specific semester. The surveys were distributed through the faculty of the School of Communication. The sample represented a complete selection of majors from around the campus with the heaviest portion (553 or 45%) from the School of Communication. 25% reported having had three or more classes requiring group assignments. 58% said that they felt the group selection method had a direct impact on the group's final results.

1988). The PR professionals we send forth to work in and consult with these organizations must, therefore, have the basic ability to understand and interact effectively within groups. Giving our students workteam experience in our classes may be one of the most important educational building blocks that we provide.

Learning theory supports our gut instincts that group experiences can be enriching and meaningful. Group projects give students a respite from the standard lecture and enable them to learn experientially. This form of "learning by doing" is likely to result in far greater comprehension and retention than found with traditional methods (Pike, 1989; Cross, 1981; McLagan, 1985; Kolb, 1984). Simply put, if we expect our students to succeed professionally, we must offer them the kind of concepts that they can not only understand, but we must provide them with skills and knowledge they can go out and use.

Given 1) the importance of group skills for organizational and professional survival, 2) the richness of learning through group experience, 3) the pervasiveness of group projects in university classrooms, 4) students' lukewarm response to group assignments, and 5) the obvious shortcomings of the common group selection methods, there is clearly room for a more constructive approach to the selection process of student groups.

There is a method for constructing your student groups that provides optimum performance potential, alleviates the professor's stress of responsibility and allows students some creative input. It is also a far more professional method and helps set the important business tone necessary for success in these ventures.

The first step in putting together an optimum student group is done early in the semester. The professor asks each student to submit an anonymous resume (with student's name removed) and cover letter. The resume is to include not just a work history, but a compilation of communication experience gained in volunteer work or campus media. For instance, editor of high school newspaper or graphic artist for the pep club would be considered important data. Additionally, the student lists grade point averages, current extracurricular activities and hours they are unavailable during the week due to these activities, class or job. The cover letter is sent to the professor and explains, as any cover letter would, why the applicant would be an asset to a public relations agency and job they are particularly interested in. The list of possibilities, from account executive, to researcher, to copywriter, should be discussed completely prior to assigning the resume and letter.

By removing their names from their resumes and cover letters, the students are, in effect, reviewed blindly, with decisions based purely upon their desires and qualifications for the positions. This anonymity enables the professor to avoid the previously mentioned pitfalls of more biased methods of selection. Students can be requested to place an identification number in the upper right hand corner of their resumes and cover letters to assist the professor in communicating his or her reactions to each student's materials while preserving student anonymity.

Let's stop for a moment and consider the positive impact this method has already had on a learning situation. The assignment has

made the students consider their own standing regarding their potential individual careers, e.g. "Gee, maybe I should be working on the campus newspaper, my experience is a little bleak." The students have to produce a quality document free from error, they learn how to prepare a cover letter and begin to creatively deal with the problem of self-promotion when looking for the first job. All of these factors are important to the student's growth in any field, but are particularly valuable in a profession demanding experience, accuracy and creative ingenuity.

Step two calls upon the professor's managerial instincts. Careful consideration of the resumes and cover letters should result in choices for the student leaders, for the number of groups needed for the class. The professor examines such qualities as past leadership experience, writing, grade point average, or even perceived desire to succeed based on the cover letter.

After choosing the required number of leaders, there are two methods that can be used to arrange the group. The first method is simply for the professor to put together the groups based on talents, availability, class standing, or other criteria he or she deems important. For example, placing a strong writer with a weak writer who is a talented artist is preferable to three strong writers and no one who can type. This is a fun process that enables the professor to really get to know each student, something that always enriches the classroom environment.

Method two is, however, the recommended route. This involves scheduling a meeting with the student leaders who were chosen from the stack of resumes. By holding a separate meeting outside class

time, the professor begins to develop the businesslike tone and importance of the project. If the group meets for coffee or gathers in a conference room with doughnuts, etc., the students begin to feel responsible and honored. These feelings translate to the tone with which they manage their groups.

At the meeting, the professor presents the remaining resumes to the leaders. It is the students' task to decide upon the final groups or agencies by the next class meeting. It is helpful, but not necessary, to have the resumes divided into groups like "writers", "artists", "speakers", etc. The leaders are; 1) told what qualities a good manager possesses, 2) given an account executive's job description that details their responsibilities to the group, 3) fully briefed on delegation skills and 4) urged to meet with the professor at any time during the project for help and/or advice.

The students are then instructed to bargain, barter, wheel and deal with each other to fill in the remaining members of their agencies. In other words, they must study the resumes and negotiate for their players. The professor observes, gently nudging the discussion by offering non-directive insights into the negotiation process. The process continues until the final groupings are decided. At the beginning of the next class meeting, the leaders are instructed to hand in a typewritten list of the final groupings.

To the student leader the advantage of this method, beyond the tremendous opportunity for persuasion, negotiation, and compromise with peers, is that each leader will know the talents

and abilities of the students they'll be working with so closely during the coming weeks.

This method of group design has been tested in Professor Beaman's public relations classes for the past two years and is currently being tested in other application-oriented communication courses. Thus far, student feedback and personal observation have confirmed that using this approach yields more equitable groups and a superior end result. As an example, one student testified "it provides us with the kind of real-world experience we need...The professional tone made everyone really rise to the occasion." This method gives the students a feeling of importance and bonding within the groups that is missing from groups selected by other methods.

We don't rely on hit or miss when working in public relations. We should give the same careful consideration to student agencies as we do to the campaigns we ask them to produce.

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